

Hobbies

Experts' new hobby is panning silver — dollars, that is

By Roger Boye

More and more experts are panning the designs of Uncle Sam's 1991 commemorative coins, especially a silver dollar honoring the United Service Organizations.

These experts also are calling on U.S. Mint officials to revamp the process of developing designs for such coinage.

"The USO design is mediocre at best," said Charles Atherton, secretary to the Commission of Fine Arts. "It's something you'd expect to find [on a free token] in a cereal box."

Among other things, the USO coin depicts a banner displaying "USO" and, on the tails side, an eagle perched on a globe. Another

1991 silver dollar—for the end of the Korean War—shows a soldier climbing a hill with two jets overhead.

In a Coinage magazine column, senior editor Ed Reiter said the USO and Korean War silver dollars "look more like casualties than tributes" and called the three 1991 Mt. Rushmore commemorative coins "insipid-looking" and "unartistic."

The Commission of Fine Arts reviews new coin designs and recommends modifications (the secretary of the Treasury has final approval). Commission members weren't pleased when they examined preliminary sketches of the USO and Korean War dollars earlier this year.

"Commemorative coins should

contribute to the celebration of our culture," Atherton said on April 11. "But the USO design is trite and shallow, and the Korean War coin is too busy."

Atherton and others believe that mint officials should seek coin designs from a large number of persons or conduct "open competitions" that anyone could enter. In recent years, the government has used "invited competitions" for commemorative coinage, which were limited to a handful of artists and the mint's own engraving staff.

Several hobby pros also blame Congress for the poor designs, because lawmakers often approve legislation for commemorative coinage just a few months before coin production must begin. That

gives officials little time to conduct a competition and work on the designs.

Indeed, President Bush signed the Korean War coin act on Oct. 31 and coin production is scheduled to begin May 6. The mint was so rushed that it considered design submissions only from its engraving staff.

Hobby newspaper Coin World has endorsed design-selection procedures that are "open and flexible, yet formal and specific," in part to stimulate interest in

the commemorative programs. Some of the profits from the sale of Korean War coins will help pay for a memorial in Washington, and the USO will share in profits from its silver dollar.

"Increasingly, competitor federal mints are vying for a share of the American marketplace," said a Coin World editorial. "In such an environment, the U.S. Mint can no longer afford to take its customers for granted or settle for less than the best from our best artists."